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ABSTRACT

The Training and Development Corporation (TDC) began the redesign of its youth development system with the belief that the center of effort would be local and success would ultimately turn on the capacity of individuals and organizations to transform themselves. TDC's first generation Career Advancement Center (CAC) prototype was in place by 1986. In its most abstract formulation, CAC was a framework--an open-architecture systems approach to planning, organizing, undertaking, and evaluating individual career development programs and transitions. By 1988, a technology platform was being tested that integrated services for each customer, leading eventually to development of TDC's Automated Case Management System. More recently, the youth development experience has been enriched with the introduction of TDC's WORKS Enterprises. The experience of designing and operating CACs demonstrated the following: institutional reform must be guided by the conviction that very high levels of performance are nearly universally possible; virtually all youth have the potential to achieve to very high levels; a different way of conceiving work is needed; and a customer service movement in government means examining what it means to be a customer and vigorously pursing the understanding of customers' needs and circumstances. (YLB)

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Customer Service in a Youth Development System

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T·D·C
TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

If the bottom line of a stock company is to return a profit to shareholders, the bottom line of a not-for-profit like ours is to make a difference. In 1984, after nearly a decade of operation, we went back to the drawing boards to reformulate the way we went about our work. We were convinced that we could improve our bottom line considerably and set about to make more of a difference with an urgency that shareholders would have appreciated. Initially three ideas inspired the design process: that our work should be customer centered; demand driven; and computer integrated. Later we would add an important fourth idea to the mix: that our work should be value-adding to the maximum extent feasible. Four simple ideas. Or so they seemed.

By 1984 considerable public attention had been given to the need for reforming schools and, in the background, anxiety was increasing over the capacity of out-dated technical education systems and fragmented job training programs to fulfill increasingly vital roles in the emerging economy. Initiatives were beginning to take shape. Some emphasized improving practice, others overhauling systems. Each ultimately aimed at shaping learning and transition environments suited to contemporary needs and standards. Responses varied by the extent to which the issue was perceived to be one of doing the "work right" or doing the "right work". Depending upon their conception of the problem, groups headed into schools to work with teachers, administrators, and local school boards or into statehouses and the nation's capital to convince policy makers to legislate systemic change. Some moved into all of these environments and back into research labs to support an expansive change agenda.

Tradition would work against reform. Over time, the work of learning had been parceled out to many specialized groups. While mainstream academic high schools, vocational schools, and second-chance recovery programs were the most visible, within and beyond them much of the work was the responsibility of even more narrowly defined specialties. Balkinization was a consequence of longstanding divisions of responsibilities and authorities among levels of government and across institutions and disciplines. These structural arrangements coexisted with an array of narrowly defined national policies and attendant categories of funding aimed at ameliorating specific conditions, creating an even greater dissonance between the call for unified action and the experience of daily life in the many youth development enclaves within and beyond schools.

We began our redesign process with the belief that the center of effort in the youth development enterprise was and would be local and that success would ultimately turn on the capacity of individuals and organizations to transform themselves. We were convinced that inertial forces and idiosyncrasies of place could be overcome by creating frameworks and inventing tools which addressed two critically important matters: first and foremost, the need to create coherence and cohesion in an individual's experience of development; and second, the need to develop capacity in organizations and in individuals to achieve such fundamental change as would be required in any of the reforms that might be contemplated. Our contribution, as we saw it, would be to create two new integrative platforms--one a carefully crafted organization, the other a technology application. The organization would be designed to rationalize and support the exploratory,

learning, planning, decision making, and management processes necessary to effectively undertake individually customized learning endeavors and transition programs. The technology would inject into this complex service enterprise many of the benefits which had accrued to companies which had introduced computer-integrated manufacturing processes into their operations much earlier. Time-consuming administrative tasks, complex developmental plans and resource arrangements, involvement's, achievements, appointments, insights, information, standards--all could be unified in ways which eased burdens and improved both the quality and efficiency of services.

Combining the organization and the technology application would open wholly new possibilities for conducting, evaluating and participating in learning and accomplishing transitions. We anticipated creating a supply-push/demand-pull change strategy which would place control and tools in the hands of each party in the local learning community--beginning with the customer. Students, parents, teachers, counselors, employers, service providers, mentors, administrators, evaluators--all could be appropriately and closely involved in shaping and interpreting a development plan and process.

As we undertook this work, we also supported the idea of developing a strategic legislative framework and had an appreciation for the need for a new, compelling, commonly held vision of learning in our personal and community lives as well as for the future prospects of our economy and society. However, we understood that to achieve the new and emerging goals of reform, tools needed to be invented to construct new formulations with materials and people invested in old ones. And we were impatient. It seemed in 1984 that, while not impossible, it would take a long time to achieve

agreement on legislation which would overhaul the nation's increasingly interdependent educational, social service, and labor market systems. Moreover, much of what legislation would endeavor to accomplish was possible with existing or attainable permissions.

We concluded that a delivery capability was within our reach which would be organized around an individual customer, informed by research coming out of the cognitive sciences which validated our intuitions about experiential learning, exploiting new technologies as well as new understandings, and performing to high standards. And so we began.

Once underway, the first realization we came to is that you cannot simply orient services to customers. As we systematically analyzed our work, it became apparent that the concept of service itself changes dramatically under different sets of assumptions. What in one conception is a valuable service, is in another an unnecessary diversion of resources from developmental activity. For example, in a large institutionally-based residential program, activities such as food service, janitorial support, and facilities maintenance consume significant resources and are regarded as essential services. In an alternate model, with a much smaller-scale residential population, these activities can be undertaken by students who are transformed from passive recipients to instrumental agents--active learners engaged in mission-critical activity.

A case can be made for each approach, and there are viable options along the continuum. The point is that it is not enough to ask whether a particular activity is "customer friendly". The first question is whether it should be done at all, and if so, to what particular ends? by whom? how? and to what

standards? The answers to all of these questions derive from fundamental principles of design which are expressions of values, understandings, and convictions shaped by research findings and empirical evidence and conditioned by the views and tastes of customers themselves.

This insight stimulated us to adopt an analytical framework which centered on the customer and discriminated between processing costs and value-adding investments. We were troubled by what we discovered. In an organization which prided itself upon its commitment to developmental services, the pattern of investment suggested a different orientation. We allocated substantial resources to processing functions which were incidental to the service relationship and of no value to the customer. A simple way to think about this is to visualize the entire process in the familiar terms of the old factory model of production: an assembly line with a conveyor and value-adding stations. The object of the customer is to move from one status in the labor market to another more desirable status. The object of the factory is to build human capital in order to have an impact on that process--to accelerate movement and/or propel the customer further than would be possible without the assistance of the factory. The factory has no intrinsic value; it is only as good as it can do. Within the factory, investments are relatively easily attributed to infrastructure and activity centers and classified as either supporting the conveyor or the value-adding functions. While each function is necessary, they are not of equal worth. The challenge is to allocate the least resources necessary to the conveyor the most possible to the value-adding functions. (In any particular instance, the objective is to produce the highest value-adding contribution with the resources at hand. That is to say that a high value-added intervention is not always called for but once resource parameters are set, a

high value-adding strategy is always wise.) We found ourselves overly invested in the conveyor.

The analysis which ensued fundamentally altered our conception of the organization--and consequently, nearly every aspect of its design. It called upon us to redefine the nature of our work, the competency requirements of our staff, and the technologies which we would employ. Here again we found a useful analog. We considered ourselves in a process similar to transforming from a hospital administrative apparatus to a clinical practice. Many of the components were the same, but their orientation, relationship, composition, and function would change dramatically.

For our purposes, contemporary technologies had no particular virtue apart from their ability to advance the purposes at hand. Technologies which accelerate movement over a course set in the wrong direction simply compound problems at dizzying speeds as so many organizations have discovered. Yet, contemporary information technologies have already created new possibilities and will continue to transform the economic and social dimensions of the service landscape. They make possible economies of intimacy--efficiencies and effectiveness that accrue from smaller-scale, team-based, peer-driven, collaborative enterprise and learning. They can integrate the service experience of individual customers. They can vastly improve distribution systems increasing both the reach and impact of services. They can empower customers by opening up multiple channels of communication, unprecedented arrays of information, and new modes of instruction and interaction. They can support sophisticated accounting and performance modeling systems which increase accountability and form the basis of well

constructed continuous improvement systems. Yet even as they hold out such promise, they create new inequalities and new barriers to economic well being for individuals and organizations unable to access and employ them. This too needs to be factored into a customer service system which exists to create universal access to an economy with a higher technology-literacy threshold.

A Customer Driven Practice

TDC's first generation Career Advancement Center (CAC) prototype rolled out by 1986. The Career Advancement Center in its most abstract formulation is a framework--an open-architecture systems approach to planning, organizing, undertaking, and evaluating individual career development programs and transitions. In its most concrete form, it is a carefully crafted environment--a place where people dream, plan, and work together building competence and confidence with the support of a very able staff, rich resources, powerful data bases, and sophisticated systems and technologies. It is also a carefully articulated constellation of service elements which can be combined in customized sets and delivered in a variety of modes to meet the particular needs, capabilities, tastes, and objectives of individual customers as determined through an ongoing assessment process. Finally, it is a set of relationships--many of which are intentionally created to improve the prospects for the success of each customer and to ensure that the Career Advancement Center stays close to its customer base and continues to improve.

Developing the technology applications to support the Career Advancement Center proceeded on a slower track, but by 1988 a technology

platform was being prototyped and tested which integrated services for each customer, leading eventually to the development of TDC's Automated Case Management System (ACMS). With the ACMS it became possible to efficiently organize services around an individual; to consult expert systems and incorporate results in a customer's personal plan; to quickly qualify customers for a tangle of federal, state, and local programs with differing participation rules and reporting requirements; to manage the complex contractual, coordinating, and referral relationships associated with the real life experience of the customers we serve; and to co-manage complicated, highly accountable, goal driven plans.

More recently we have enriched our youth development experience with the introduction of TDC's WORKS Enterprises™. While we have many WORKS Enterprise™ designs scheduled for development as funding permits; two prototypes are currently being tested. Media WORKS™ and Theatre Arts WORKS™ each embody the characteristics of high performance work organizations and high performance learning environments. Work and learning is fused in a youth enterprise informed as much by research in the cognitive sciences about the learning process as by the literature surrounding new forms of work organization which have dominated business presses in recent years. WORKS Enterprise™ designs rely heavily upon our nearly two decades of work in progress--from Job Corps, where we have experienced the impact of a high quality, standards-driven, comprehensive services model, to the Career Advancement Center, where we have had a free hand in crafting a high quality, customer-driven, framework which employs our ACMS technology to integrate services into a coherent and cohesive experience for each individual customer. (Very different approaches--each resulting in

powerfully focused, comprehensive developmental activity.) WORKS Enterprise™ design incorporates insights gained from Job Corps and Career Advancement Center experience as well as the systematic analysis of customer level data captured in the ACMS. And it does more.

The WORKS Enterprise™ initiative breaks new ground for us. By re-scaling, we achieve economies of intimacy working with groups small enough to be self-sufficient in many aspects of everyday living which are nearly impossible to achieve in a larger institutional setting. By organizing as an enterprise, work and learning become mutually reinforcing developmental experiences with relevance which is apparent to everyone involved. And by creating revenue generating learning organizations, it is possible to create universal access to high quality work-place-based education in both urban core and rural areas where opportunities are limited.

We believe that with this design we can substantially alter the shape of the "production function" of the enterprise by pursuing a much higher value-adding formulation. In the WORKS Enterprise™ design we are systematically substituting developmental investments for costs inherent in institutionally based activity. At the same time, the experience of participation is safe, personal, comfortable, and challenging. Moreover we are producing products of value which drive down the social costs of what is otherwise a very expensive, publicly financed activity or a foregone opportunity. All of this might be mere conjecture but for the fact that with the ACMS we can track extremely detailed activity based participation, resource consumption, and performance experience for each customer whose background characteristics are also known. So over time, it should be possible to illuminate the "black

box"--to more fully understand and therefore to be able to further successfully alter the relationships between the customers we serve, the results we achieve, and the techniques we employ. This work testifies to the view that there need not be a dichotomy between a deep concern for people and competent performance in serving them with contemporary tools and understandings--notwithstanding conventional wisdom about "people" people, technology, and rigorous work--or the all too fashionable cynicism which has it that nothing works.

The following thoughts about customer service in a youth development system are grounded in the experience of designing and operating our Career Advancement Centers (CACs) which have been customized for youth who are both in and out of school as well as in our work with racially and ethnically diverse urban and rural Job Corps student populations, Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker families, and more tentatively, in the WORKS Enterprises™. So it is a combination of heuristic knowledge, empirical evidence, research, common sense, and ongoing inquiry which underlie these several considerations which follow.

A Revolution in Relationship

A confluence of events and a convergence of forces are wreaking havoc upon education, training, and labor market organizations. Economic circumstances have conspired with demographic trends and weakening cultural and social structures including the family to create unprecedented demands upon our workforce development institutions and all who inhabit them.

World-wide economic competition fueled by the rapid development and exploitation of information technologies, differential labor rates and working conditions, and the mobility of managerial and capital resources has not favored America in recent years. Our diminished dominance in world and internal markets has provoked debate about the core mission of our schools, training organizations, and labor market institutions; inspired much of the restructuring which is occurring across these systems as well as that which is contemplated; and contributed to serious resource constraints in all levels of government and among firms in most industries.

While there are many dimensions to our economic problems and education, training, and efficient labor market institutions are only part of the answer, there is broad agreement that our economic well being and our social and political stability will increasingly depend upon human ability: upon our knowledge, our skills and our facility to employ them. Additionally, our future economic success will depend upon very nearly everyone performing to high standards. And that is the rub. Increased competition has already imposed higher performance requirements upon professional, technical, and production workers who wish to maintain their standards of living or, in many instances, simply protect their livelihoods. But what is at stake is the standard of living of a whole nation with success dependent upon the initiative and creativity of nearly everyone who is employed, including large segments of the population who have historically been out of bounds in the competition for work and many more who, when they have been employed, have been expected to do little more than show up and follow orders.

Preparing people for roles in an economy seeking to achieve comparative advantage on the basis of human performance is no small request of institutions which were originally designed to develop a relatively small cadre of intellectually competent leaders and a large supporting cast, while weeding out those who fell short. The task is made considerably more difficult by a cultural tradition which attributes differential performance to innate ability rather than to effective effort. More than anything else and before we further alter any aspect of service delivery in pursuit of improvement, we need to dispel this cultural myth which is at the core of our thinking about possibilities and consequently about the potential for learning and performance of each individual in our society. Institutional reform will have the possibility of success only if we are guided by the conviction that very high levels of performance are nearly universally possible. This of course suggests that the concept of customer must change as well.

The new customer is competent. Increasingly well informed, discriminating, and accustomed to quality, affordability, and immediacy in the service exchange, the new customer is assuming control in areas which have traditionally been in the hands of others. Transactions which depended upon information possessed only by the provider creating a decidedly unequal exchange are now conducted by two knowledgeable parties. Whether it is in the doctor-patient relationship, or with the insurance company offering to furnish cost comparisons or fleet-purchasing power to its customers who are in the process of buying a car, the information revolution has fundamentally altered the service relationship. (Even the customers of our diplomatic or not so diplomatic services are, with the advent of CNN, in a substantially different relationship than they would have been before as we so vividly saw in Iraq and

more recently in Haiti). But if there is resistance to the idea of the new customer in general, it is heightened when it comes to youth, and even more particularly so with disadvantaged youth, where belief in the empowered consumer collides with deeply embedded ideas and traditions.

If we begin with the idea that youth development is all about the possibilities of individual customers, virtually all of whom have the potential to achieve to very high levels across a spectrum of activities and disciplines, then we will worry about the right things. By relating to youth as fully enfranchised customers, by affirming and respecting their individual capabilities and calibrating our relationships to them by their performance-readiness, by abandoning our cultural prejudice favoring innate ability over effective effort as an explanation for superior performance, and by avoiding the trap of worrying overly much about the place of genius in this scheme, we are both free to discover ways to develop each individual and obligated to do so. For, as soon as we overcome our penchant to create dependent relationships, and throw out the school bell-curve, a new distribution of responsibilities quickly takes shape. What does it take to truly individualize programs of study, chart customized trajectories of development, mobilize resources across a community, and evaluate performance ability against new dynamic sets of standards? How do we contextualize learning, design worthwhile projects, develop social learning skills, rely upon mentors outside of institutions, involve employers in a meaningful way in the development of youth, and overcome our fears about what will increasingly occur out of our view, and thus become less susceptible to our direct control? How do we support the delivery of work-place-based education and training activities where there is such potential for work and learning to be powerfully

connected? How do we evaluate what matters, rather than what matter happens to be easy to measure? The foundation for an effective customer service system is constructed with the answers to these questions.

In the Beginning Was the Word

"Customers." Those whose lips the word rolls off comfortably are probably not educators, social workers, government employees, or staff of CBOs. Students, clients, participants, brothers, sisters...customers. But as awkward as it may seem initially, language is the first and in many respects the easiest thing to alter. All too often, it is the only thing to change, as many women and minorities will attest. Habits persist. (Meaningful change seems to be inversely related to the speed with which new signage appears. Sign painters are the earliest and often the only certain beneficiaries of endeavors to revolutionize our ways.) Habits supported by the culture, systems, incentives, and structure of organizations are certain to defy mere utterances. So the need is for more than a vocabulary. We are called upon to develop a different way of conceiving our work and after that to establish new expectations, new relationships, new practices, new systems, new standards, new incentives--wholly new work organizations and work cultures. And of course, we must meet the attendant demands for new sets of organizational capabilities and employee competencies.

Our schools and training institutions are not where they were, nor are they yet where they will be. They are in the midst of a difficult transition from a period of affluence and relative stability in their missions, structures, core

technologies, and modes of operation to a time when few of these familiar conditions will obtain. To a greater extent than we admit, we are a nation in crisis struggling to come to terms with rapidly and radically changing conditions absent a unifying framework. We worried for a long time that education could become too career oriented, too narrowly focused, too much about employment, too much about a job. Now, just as we are coming to see that the concept of a job may be an artifact of an earlier kind of economy, we are increasingly organizing the educational experience around jobs. We'll undoubtedly get it right eventually but not before we disturb old comforts and not before we invest in the transformations we so earnestly advocate.

Overthrowing the Gatekeepers

The customer service movement in government implies a concern with productivity as well as with the relationship between service provider and recipient. This in turn, implies a considerable interest in the transactions between government and those it serves. Productivity is generally understood to be a function of interrelationships among quality, quantity and cost. With programs sponsored by government there is an additional dimension: a necessity to ascertain to what end, and gauge with what impact, products and services are rendered. Government is in the business of making a difference, and doing so in pursuits which the private economy would not tend to undertake without inducement, if at all. Notwithstanding this higher standard-- which holds government accountable to produce goods and services which are instrumental in achieving public policy objectives-- few public investments are systematically analyzed in a manner which enables an accurate assessment

of their value against this standard. Some would argue that this is inherent in the nature of the work of government. But upon examination, the real culprit becomes apparent. We seldom set out to achieve such a result.

When it comes to social program design, we settle for an artist's sketch rather than demanding the architectural and engineering work which would form the basis for knowing precisely what we are setting out to do. Consequently, it is very difficult to evaluate or improve performance. The unit of observation is usually the program with activities disaggregated only slightly--certainly not enough to establish any clear picture of the transactions which occur and constitute service. These variable bundles of service, people, and circumstance interact in a blur out of the range of focus of our lens. Yet this is precisely what we should be looking at if we are to perfect our policies and our practices.

Some years ago a respected research organization concluded that a combination of work experience and classroom training was more efficacious than either intervention alone. That is interesting and useful as far as it goes. But as a customer I want to know what is going to work for me, under what conditions, with what commitments of time and resources. I want to know how I can improve my prospects for success. What combination of services in what sequence works best for people like me? Who does it best? Quickest? Cheapest? Most reliably?

And as a provider with a real customer, I need to know the same thing or I will lose my customer to someone else who does--that is, if I have a real customer, and if I am providing products and services which are meant to be

instrumental in the life of that customer. If instead, I have a customer in name only, I can get along as a gate keeper--controlling resources, defining the rules of engagement based on bureaucratic convenience, and managing and limiting clients access rather than adapting to their needs and preferences as customers.

While they continue to exist, fewer and fewer gatekeepers will survive the shake out in the public service enterprise. Customer demand, and the power of technology to drive both accessibility and accountability, will erode the authority and standing of institutions which continue to be gatekeepers. They will be replaced by more customer-driven agencies whether public or private.

We will know that a true customer service movement is forming in this field when we seriously examine what it means to be a customer and vigorously pursue understanding customers needs and circumstances as they define them; when we take on the inelegant tasks associated with defining the "stuff" of our work; when we set new meaningful standards of quality and competence; when we revolutionize our practices and the shape and content of the organizations which support them; when we invest in developing the front line workers and organizations truly responsible for our success or failure; and finally, when we are willing to build hot houses and turn up the temperature to see what we might grow taking the risk that some things will wilt and die as others reach new heights and bear fruit. We have to take risks; and we have to be willing to fail, even to celebrate failure, for what we will come to know from it.

We live in a time of great upheaval. Old certainties fade as fast as electrons moving across screens painting new images of our contemporary

reality. We know that we need to evolve new capacities to transition ever more quickly to do the work of our age and place. And we know that we are more interdependent today than ever before in our history, or indeed, than any people have been with the peoples of the world, in all of history.

We will achieve economic and social security for ourselves only to the extent that we succeed in reweaving our people and our institutions into a tapestry that can hold the promise of our age. One thing is certain though, as long as the bankruptcy court is the centerpiece of our economic transition system, and the social program of choice is a prison sentence, success will elude us. Surely we can make more productive investments in our collective well being.